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CHALLENGES FOR CURRICULUM IN  
A CONTEMPORARY SOUTH AFRICA

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## INTRODUCTION

Curriculum is a complex and contested terrain that is variously described based on disparate philosophical lenses through which it is viewed. When the word 'curriculum' is used it is generally understood as applying to school education, that is to the prescribed learning programmes of schools or more broadly to the learning opportunities provided to school learners, rather than to higher education. A survey of articles published in prominent curriculum journals such as the *Journal of Curriculum Studies* and *Curriculum Inquiry*, for instance, shows that very little space is given to articles on higher education. Ironically, the term was first used in relation to higher education rather than school education. It was Ramus, the sixteenth-century master at the University of Paris, who first worked on 'methodising' knowledge and teaching. It was in Ramus's work, a taxonomy of knowledge, the *Professio Regia* (1576), which was published posthumously, that the word 'curriculum' first appears, referring to "a sequential course of study" (for more detail see Doll 2002:31). According to Doll (2002:31), Ramus's idea of a general codification of knowledge (curriculum) flourished among universities that were strongly influenced by Calvinism, ostensibly because of their affinity for discipline, order and control.

Our understanding of curriculum has (r)evolved since early conceptions of the 16th century. For the purpose of our discussion here, curriculum simply refers to what knowledge is included or excluded in university learning and teaching courses and how the knowledge is organised in academic institutions. My specific interest in this chapter is to point out that curriculum is a neglected area in higher education discourses generally and in South Africa more specifically, and further to suggest some challenges for curriculum in view of competing global and local forces influencing what might be taught and learned in higher education institutions in South Africa.

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In South Africa we have witnessed considerable change in the higher education landscape in recent years. Changes include: a proliferation of policies (focusing mainly on governance, funding, quality assurance and student access and success); the merging of institutions; institutional changes (such as the introduction of strategic plans, quality assurance directorates and equity plans). Presumably all of these are important, but the changes have not incorporated much talk about the implications for curriculum and perhaps more importantly, curriculum has not featured as a central concern of higher education transformation in South Africa. This situation does not seem to be peculiar to South Africa. As Barnett and Coate (2005:1) write:

All around the world, higher education is expanding rapidly, governments are mounting inquiries into higher education, more institutions are involved in running courses of study and more money is being spent on higher education, not least by students themselves. Higher education is ever more important to increasing numbers of people. And yet, despite the growth and debate, there is very little talk about the curriculum. What students should be experiencing is barely a topic for debate. What the building blocks of their courses might be and how they should be put together are even more absent from the general discussion. The very idea of curriculum is pretty well missing altogether.

In the United Kingdom, the term ‘curriculum’ does not appear in the index of the report of the UK’s most recent National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (NCIHE 1997) nor is there any mention of curriculum in the UK’s White Paper on the Future of Higher Education of 2003 (see Barnett & Coate 2005:13).

In South Africa the situation is a little better because the term ‘curriculum’ is at least alluded to in some of the important policy documents on higher education. For example, Education White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education (RSA DoE 1997) does make reference to curriculum in places. I shall refer to three instances where the term is mentioned. It is mentioned under the headings ‘Institutional autonomy’, ‘Public accountability’ and ‘Programme-based approach’. According to the White Paper the principle of institutional autonomy refers to a high degree of self-regulation concerning matters such as student admissions, curriculum, methods of teaching and assessment, and so on. Under ‘Public accountability’, the White Paper suggests that higher education curricula should be responsive to the national and regional context. The White Paper proposes that a programme-based approach would promote the diversification of access, curriculum and qualification structure. I wish to use the references made to curriculum in Education White Paper 3 as the basis for discussing some challenges for curriculum in South Africa. I shall also discuss some curriculum aspects not referred to in White Paper 3.

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### Institutional autonomy

While I do not question the idea of universities enjoying self-regulation on matters such as curriculum, there might be a danger when curriculum becomes a private domain, that is, when self-regulation in practice means that individual lecturers alone determine what is taught in the courses or modules they present.<sup>6</sup> We can debate how widespread such practices are, but the point is that they do occur. If increased and broadened participation, as stated in Education White Paper 3, is central to the transformation of the South African higher education system and its institutions, then curricula of institutions should be particularly sensitive to the needs of black, women and disabled students. Although we have witnessed increased access to students in the previously mentioned categories, at most institutions it is questionable whether access has shifted beyond formal access to include epistemological access. Morrow (2007:2) argues that formal access concerns providing access to institutions of learning and depends on factors such as admission rules and personal finances; whereas epistemological access is access to knowledge, that is, access to the knowledge that universities distribute.

However, I wish to argue for an expanded notion of epistemological access. The knowledge that universities (ought to) distribute is a contested terrain. In recent years there has been contestation about what and whose knowledge should be included in university teaching and learning programmes. Feminists, post-colonialists and sociologists of science, among others, have questioned the dominance of Western knowledge in university courses and research programmes. I suggest that epistemological access does not only involve giving access to knowledge comprising the Western canon, but also providing access to alternative ways of knowing, including indigenous ways of knowing. To achieve this notion of epistemological access, the development of gender and culturally inclusive curricula is crucial and moreover, to determine when and where this is appropriate.

A reason why scant attention is given to curriculum concerns in higher education discourses could be that something such as a national curriculum framework (as in the case of schools) does not exist. Let me immediately say that I am not suggesting that we should have national curriculum frameworks for higher education. It simply is not possible or desirable. However, I wish to suggest that higher education curriculum matters should be more critically debated in the public sphere – that curriculum should not narrowly be the concern of individual lecturers or groups of lecturers located in their particular institutions.

<sup>6</sup> This question also relates to a tension as to whether curricula get influenced from inside the academy or by the external political economy, which Bernstein (2000) referred to as 'introjection' and 'projection', respectively. Drawing on the work of Moore (2001), Clegg and Bradley (2006) suggest that in South Africa, higher education curricula, which have traditionally been the product of academic influence (introjection), is increasingly being influenced by external global forces and the need to redress past inequalities (projection).

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While I have suggested that institutional autonomy and by association academic freedom should in a certain sense be curtailed, generally speaking, institutional autonomy and academic freedom are desirable ideals. However, there are developments with respect to teaching programmes that might pose threats to institutional autonomy and academic freedom. For example, teaching programmes have been affected by the ascendancy of an audit culture associated with the rise of neoliberalism in recent decades. The emergence of an audit culture (and related terms) in discourses on higher education might be understood against the backdrop of a rising culture of performativity in society generally, and in education more specifically. In his seminal work *The Postmodern Condition* (a commissioned report on the University to the government of Québec) Lyotard (1984) introduces the term 'performativity'. Since its coining this term has been widely used in the criticism of contemporary education practice. As Barnett and Standish (2003:16) write:

The term aptly exposes the jargon and practices of efficiency and effectiveness, quality assurance and control, inspection and accountability that have become so prominent a feature of contemporary educational regimes. Whatever is undertaken must be justified in terms of an increase in productivity measured in terms of a gain in time.

Moreover, Ball (2003:216) argues that "performativity is a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change – based on rewards and sanctions". But how might we understand the emergence of this policy technology in recent years? The rising culture of performativity is closely intertwined with the ascendancy of neoliberalism in the past four decades (see Peters 2004 for a detailed discussion). Associated with the rise of neoliberalism is the decline of the welfare state. The state's role shifts from that of being a provider to that of monitor and regulator. One way in which this development has played out in South African higher education is that The Higher Education Act of 1998 legitimises the establishment of a Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC), responsible for monitoring and regulating the quality of all higher education programmes through a process of accreditation of such programmes and qualifications. On the neoliberal agenda the idea of self-regulation is evident in the work of the HEQC through systems and processes of peer auditing, evaluation and review, leading to what is referred to as the attainment of self-accreditation status on the part of higher education institutions. Self-regulation and self-accreditation could be misleading terms because, in a sense, they imply an association with academic freedom and institutional autonomy. However, these terms do not mean the abandonment of state control but the establishment of a new form of control; what Du Gay (1996) calls "controlled de-control" or what Vidovich (2002) refers to as "steering at a distance" – performativity remains the regulatory regime. Teaching programmes in South Africa are therefore subject to regulation by the state even though it might be by 'remote control'. Evidence of such regulation by the HEQC was, among several processes, the national review of MBA programmes conducted in

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the early 2000s and several education programmes in the middle to late 2000s. The outcome of the national reviews not only involved withdrawal of accreditation in some instances but also resulted in curricula of other programmes being reconfigured based on recommendations made. I wish to point out that not all of these developments are bad – performativity and quality assurance mechanisms should not simply be demonised or eulogised. The point is that the quality assurance mechanisms for higher education programmes are increasingly becoming state-driven processes rather than academy-driven ones. In the case of the national reviews conducted by the HEQC, academics were involved in several steps of the quality assurance processes. This is laudable, but the agenda was not set by academics.

Another matter related to performativity is worth noting: the efficiency of teaching – what Bearn (2000:253) called “pedagogical performativity” – smooth, easy and fast pedagogies that have become prevalent in contemporary global society. This concerns teaching with the aim of increasing grades by offering students neatly packaged study guides and readers, encouraging students to use the Internet so as to extend the reach of their lectures, and encouraging students to work on their own or with peers. Efficiency of teaching is increased by decreasing contact time with students. With respect to teaching, what can be measured is valued and what might be of value is not measured.

The challenge is how to develop and design curricula that will give expression to the personal capacities of students amidst a dominant culture of performativity on the one hand, and on the other hand will avert the development of curricula that narrowly suit the desires of individual lecturers and are therefore not publicly answerable. But let me move on to the reference to curriculum in Education White Paper 3 under the heading ‘Public accountability’.

### **Public accountability**

As mentioned earlier, reference is made to curriculum under ‘Public accountability’ in Education White Paper 3, and it is specifically stated that higher education curricula should be responsive to national and regional contexts. I would like to broaden this view by speaking of responsiveness to the African context. The number of international students at South African universities has increased significantly over the past few years. At Stellenbosch University, for example, there are more than 2 000 international students, many from African countries. International students bring benefits to South African universities in many ways, one of these being that they provide an important source of income to universities. But the question that must be answered is to what extent curricula at South African universities have changed to accommodate a diverse student corps.

An even more fundamental question is whether the curricula of South African universities reflect the context in which they are located. I am not suggesting that curricula of South African universities should narrowly reflect mainly local content. It goes without saying

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that South African universities should contribute to the production and ‘transmission’ of an international body of knowledge. However, Mahmood Mamdani’s experience raises a very important point. At the 2005 biennial conference of SAARDHE,<sup>7</sup> Mamdani shared that when he was appointed to a position at the University of Cape Town (UCT) a few years earlier, he found to his astonishment that the university had a Centre for African Studies. He wondered what kind of studies were taking place elsewhere in the university. When UCT markets itself as an African university (and it does), what does this mean? Is this idea reflected in the institution’s curricula? For example, is the growing body of literature on African philosophy reflected in ‘mainstream’ philosophy courses or is it the business of a Centre for African Studies – or something similar – to teach it? These are important but neglected matters in higher education debates in South Africa. They are as important, if not more important than matters such as governance, funding and quality assurance.

An important curriculum project might be to reclaim African knowledge – that African traditions and cultures should occupy a central place in what is learned in universities. Such a project might be necessary as Africa has a long academic history and boasts the oldest existing university, Egypt’s Al-Azhar, which is the only African university still organised according to its original Islamic model. According to Teferra and Altbach (2004:23) all other African universities have adopted a Western model of academic organisation. African universities have been shaped by colonialism and organised according to European models – or as Teferra and Altbach (2004:23) put it: “[H]igher education in Africa is an artifact of colonial policies.” Colonial education policies had the following effects on African higher education: there was limited access (colonial authorities feared widespread access to higher education); the language of instruction was the language of the coloniser; academic freedom and institutional autonomy were limited; and the curriculum was limited (colonisers supported disciplines such as law that would assist with colonial administration) (for a detailed discussion see Teferra & Altbach 2004:23). Not all of this may be relevant to South Africa. However, the point is that curricula in South African universities remain largely organised according to Western academic models. In arguing for the centrality of African interests in curricula does not mean that curricula should exclusively include African concerns. Curricula should also include knowledge forming part of a world corpus of knowledge. Importantly, African universities should contribute to a world corpus of knowledge in the same manner in which Harvard, Oxford and St Andrews do, while remaining unmistakably American, English and Scottish respectively (Makgoba & Seepe 2004:27).

The challenge is how to develop and design curricula that are locally and regionally relevant when Western epistemologies continue to dominate and power relations are unequal. A stepping stone for meeting this challenge might lie in work I have explored in detail elsewhere (see Le Grange 2002, 2007). Briefly: this work draws on insights from inquiry done by Turnbull (1997, 2000) in the field of the sociology of scientific

<sup>7</sup> South African Association for Research and Development in Higher Education

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knowledge. Turnbull examines the way in which knowledge has been produced in different periods and places and what these knowledge production processes have in common. In particular, he examines the building of Gothic cathedrals, Indonesian rice farming, Polynesian navigation, modern cartography, and research into the disease malaria. He shows that in all instances knowledge production processes connect people, places and skills and that empirical verification is not the golden standard but the social organisation of trust. Drawing on Turnbull's work I argue (see Le Grange 2002, 2007) that a focus on the performative side of knowledge might be more useful in integrating seemingly disparate knowledge than a focus on the representationalist view of knowledge (abstract representations of knowledge and its hierarchical ordering into different forms). Moreover, inspiration can be sought from shifting power relations as we are witnessing a rhizome of movements across the global (referred to by some as the new social movements) that are challenging the dominance of Western knowledge. Globalisation also affords spaces for the formation of new solidarities. For example, we are witnessing the internationalisation of indigenous knowledges (knowledges of the colonised) and how these knowledges are deconstructing, deterritorialising and decolonising Western knowledge in traditional Western academic spaces such as mainstream academic conferences. For example, the American Education Research Association (AERA) now has special interest groups focusing on indigenous knowledge, gender issues, post-colonialism, and so on. But let me turn to implications of a programme-based approach to curriculum.

### **A programme-based approach to curriculum**

Teaching programmes have always existed in universities. However, one outcome of the developments in higher education policy in the late 1990s was the reconfiguration of teaching programmes at all South African universities, in terms of both organisational and design features. Several universities have changed their organisational structures to create larger units such as schools and colleges, resulting in the abandoning of traditional academic departments organised along disciplinary lines. Traditional heads or chairpersons of departments have made way for school and/or programme directors. In many instances these larger structures are organised around programmes and not disciplines. Furthermore, in terms of programme design there has been a shift in the sense that academic disciplines do not necessarily inform the goals and visions of programmes, but outcomes (some generic to all teaching programmes in South Africa and some specific to particular programmes). These outcomes are linked to the needs of both global and South African societies. The approach to curriculum design is a design down deliver up one, where modules (that are traditionally organised around disciplines) now have to be (re)designed in service of the vision and outcomes of a programme. This is at least how it works in theory – the extent to which these changes are reflected in practice vary depending on the institution. North-West University is an example of an institution that has made fairly comprehensive changes to its organisational structures with respect to academic programmes (both research and

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teaching). At Stellenbosch University, for example, new programme structures were put in place but academic departments were retained. Smaller programmes are located within departments and larger ones across departments. But what has been the impetus for these developments?

In the middle to late 1990s there was much debate in South Africa about an emerging new mode of knowledge production (mode 2). Much of the debate is captured in a book edited by Kraak (2000b). Gibbons, Limoges, Nowotny, Schwartzman, Scott and Trow (1994) and Scott (1995) argue that we are witnessing a shift from disciplinary science (mode 1) to a new mode of knowledge production that is trans-disciplinary, trans-institutional and heterogeneous. Protagonists of the mode 2 thesis argue that this new mode of knowledge production is an outcome of two powerful social forces, namely globalisation and the democratisation of access to higher education (for more detail see Kraak 2000a). Gibbons (2000:41) elaborates on the effects of democratisation by pointing out that with the massification of higher education the number of graduates has become too large to be absorbed into the disciplinary structure of academic life. The mode 2 thesis of Gibbons *et al* (1994) and Scott (1995) influenced post-apartheid South African higher education policy significantly, in particular the following policy texts: the final report of the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE), entitled *A Framework for Transformation* (1996); the Department of Education's Green Paper on Higher Education Transformation (RSA DoE 1996); the Education White Paper 3: *A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education* (RSA DoE 1997); and the Higher Education Act of 1997. One of the influences that the mode 1 versus mode 2 knowledge debate (flowing from the mentioned documents) has had on higher education in South Africa is the introduction of a programme-based approach to teaching in place of more disciplinary structured offerings. Although there has been extensive debate on mode 1 and mode 2 thinking from a research perspective, that is, in relation to knowledge production, in South Africa very little attention has been given to the implications of a programme-based teaching approach for curriculum development and design (some exceptions are Moore 2001 and Ensor 2004). It is important that these be explored. In many cases, as is the case in the faculty where I work, programmes are designed across disciplines and departments. The modules that constitute a particular programme are located in different departments. This leads to tension concerning what drives changes to a programme. Traditionally, it is within disciplines that new knowledge is produced – that disciplines are renewed through research not programmes. 'New' disciplinary knowledge is shared and transmitted in modules that are located in academic departments. Changes to modules informed by such disciplinary knowledge may be in tension with the aims, direction and vision of a teaching programme. Ideally, the renewal of a programme should be a synergy of changes happening at the module level (informed by new thinking in disciplines) and changes at programme level, such as whether the programme caters for the needs of



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black, women and disabled students.<sup>8</sup> As yet we know very little about how the tension described manifests itself in different programmes at universities and whether it is experienced differently in Science Engineering and Technology (SET) in comparison to Human and Social Sciences programmes, for example. Critical reflection on some the implications of a programme-based approach for curriculum design and development is crucial at this point in time in South Africa.

One challenge is to find out what gets lost and what is gained in the transition from mode 1 to mode 2 programme designs. What do we lose when disciplines go and what do we gain from integrated courses? Of course, mode 2 knowledge will not simply supplant mode 1 knowledge – as we are witnessing the emergence of a transdisciplinary trajectory in knowledge production, new disciplines are still being developed in certain fields. The reality is, however, that some disciplines are fragmenting or losing coherence and that the conceptual vocabulary for understanding this is to be found in the Deleuzo-Guattarian concept of rhizome (Deleuze & Guattari 1987) rather than, for example, Bernstein's (2000) dichotomy of vertical and horizontal discourses (for more detail see Le Grange 2011). But let me now turn to another challenge.

### Another challenge

There are other curriculum challenges for higher education in South Africa linked to the previous challenge, but not alluded to in recently produced higher education policies in South Africa. I shall discuss one such challenge as a particular example in time: the inclusion or exclusion of environmental concerns in higher education curricula. It is widely known that environmental problems have reached unprecedented levels. Few would disagree that our planet is on the brink of ecological disaster. Environmental problems pose several risks to humanity and the survival of life on the planet. And so the challenge is how we might include environmental concerns in higher education programmes across disciplines – not only to make students environmentally aware (or to enhance their awareness) but also to mediate environmental learning that would lead to action to improve environmental risk positions. After all, the most wonderful and innovative teaching programmes will be of no use if we do not have a decent planet to put them on. Appropriate environmental education programmes in higher education are important given the fact that those holding university degrees contribute more to environmental destruction than any other group. There are of course university modules that have for decades included environmental concerns, for example, undergraduate geography and environmental science modules, ecology components of biology modules, and so on. However, what we might not be witnessing is the translation of a rich body of knowledge being produced in a range of disciplines in engineering, natural sciences, and disciplines of the arts and social sciences such as history, geography, political science, literary criticism and fine art into teaching and

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<sup>8</sup> This might be less relevant at undergraduate level where in Bernsteinian terms the field of production and field of recontextualisation are distinctive.

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learning programmes at the undergraduate level. The developments within disciplines that I have mentioned and external influences associated with environmental concerns such as climate change and its risks (debates in the public sphere), for example, should be more strongly reflected in the higher education curricula of our time.

### How might we respond to these challenges?

I suggest that the first response might be to shift *blind spots* in higher education curricula to *blank spots*. Wagner (1993) argues that *blank spots* are what scientists know enough about to question but do not answer, and *blind spots* are what they do not know enough about or care about. Such a shift means that what is ignored or neglected would at least become part of the conversations and discussions in university lecture venues. Such a shift could serve as the basis for:

- higher education institutions to begin to develop approaches to curricula that are more inclusive, in terms of gender and culture, in all areas of specialisation they offer, acknowledging that it might be more easily done in certain areas;
- developing criteria for reviewing appropriate modules and programmes at higher education institutions so as to establish whether the module or programme takes into account gender and cultural inclusiveness; and
- including environmental concerns in all undergraduate programmes across an array of disciplines.

Furthermore, research could be conducted and reported on tensions experienced with a programme-based approach to teaching as well as what gets lost and is gained in the shift from a disciplinary to a transdisciplinary approach to designing teaching and learning programmes. For, example, one may ask which concepts and skills are no longer learned when botany and zoology are not taught to first-year university students and in their place an integrated programme is offered on biodiversity. Likewise, which concepts and skills are gained when an integrated programme on biodiversity replaces botany and zoology?

As teaching becomes more efficient (in a culture of performativity) through what I have called 'fast pedagogies', we might need to look for opportunities to slow down or even pause to reflect – to introduce slow pedagogies that might co-exist in parallel (collaterally) with 'fast pedagogies'. It is so that we cannot turn back the clock or long for a world where time and space were not so compressed as today. However, we can look for spaces for opposites (slow and fast) to co-exist – spaces that allow hybridity. Moreover, there is always the potential for something to become something other than what it is (fast becoming slow) through a process of deterritorialisation. As Colebrook (2002:xxii) so neatly captures:

Life creates and furthers itself by forming connections or territories. Light connects with plants to allow photosynthesis. Everything, from bodies, [concepts], to societies, is a form of territorialisation, or the connection of forces to produce distinct wholes. But alongside every territorialisation is the power of

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deterritorialisation. The light that connects with the plant to allow it to grow also allows for the plant to become other than itself: too much sun will kill the plant, or perhaps transform it into something else (such as sun-dried leaves becoming tobacco or sun-drenched grapes becoming sultanas). The very connective forces that allow it to become what it is (territorialise) can allow it to become what it is *not* (deterritorialise).

Vectors of escape from the debilitating effects of contemporary developments (for example, performativity and mode 2 programme organisation) therefore do not only lie outside but within such processes. However, connecting students to communities and a sense of place (or perhaps places) is cardinal if curricula are to be gender and culturally inclusive and also include environmental concerns. What is essential is that students learn by doing.<sup>9</sup> Community service-based learning (CSBL) is one vehicle that offers this potential. It was John Dewey who said that learning occurs when knowledge is directly related to experience (Dewey 1990). CSBL links directly what happens in classrooms to real-world experience. Crump (2002:144) points out that the overreaching goal of CSBL is to “provide students with a relevant education that promotes the civic involvement critical to maintaining democratic institutions”.

**CONCLUSION**

As I have mentioned, curriculum is a neglected terrain in higher education. However, in a contemporary world where knowledge is produced and transmitted rapidly and students migrate from their countries of birth to study elsewhere, it might be important to discuss afresh what knowledge is most worth learning in higher education and how this knowledge might be organised in higher education programmes. These are questions central to curriculum. In this chapter I have identified four areas of exploration linked to curriculum: *institutional autonomy*, *public accountability*, *a programme-based approach* and *environmental concerns*. I suggest that the first three are blank spots in the sense that a link has been made between these aspects and curriculum in higher education policy in South Africa. However, these aspects have not been sufficiently explored and have not been taken up sufficiently in higher education discourses and practices. I suggest that the fourth category, which might serve as a particular example (environment as a higher education curriculum concern), remains a blind spot because it has not been taken up seriously in higher education policy despite coverage in the media and the South African government’s involvement in, for example, climate change discussions at international conventions. In my discussion of the four matters I have attempted to identify curriculum challenges that these present in a South African context. I have suggested that these matters should form part of ongoing conversations in lecture venues, but that more is needed; that is engagement with communities and places if curricula are to become more inclusive.

<sup>9</sup> Students should learn by doing where it is appropriate, that is, where opportunities are provided for acquiring procedural knowledge. This would not apply to the learning of propositional knowledge.

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I part with Kappelar's (1986:212) words: "I do not really wish to conclude and sum up, rounding off the argument so as to dump it in a nutshell for the reader. A lot more could be said about any of the topics I have touched upon ... I have meant to ask the questions, to break out of the frame ... The point is not a set of answers, but making possible a different [higher education] practice ..." – a higher education practice with a more inclusive and engaged curriculum.

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